

RKM ↓

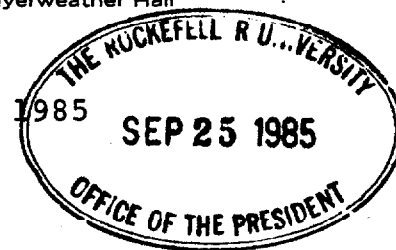
✓ bcc: Dr. J. Lederberg

Columbia University in the City of New York | New York, N. Y. 10027

UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR Emeritus

Fayerweather Hall

Sunday
22 September 1985



Dear Gene,

It was, I think, Schopenhauer who once suggested that the cardinal sin against the Holy Ghost of scholarship was to put down one's own work-in-progress to take up the writings of another. Or something to that effect. Clearly, then, I have sinned most grievously this Sunday morning. I made the mistake of opening your revised but still "preliminary draft" (as your covering note & the title of the piece clearly state) of the essay, "From Ghostwriter to editor to referee. . ." and then could not get back to my own work until I had read it through.

The revision is vastly improved. It is more analytical, differentiated, and informative than the preceding draft. This is, I submit, the candid opinion of an old curmudgeon of an editor, unprejudiced by friendship.

For one thing, it was an ingenious stroke of imagination to introduce this draft in terms of the biography of the essay itself. A self-exemplifying device that instructs the reader about the making of this essay and, by extension, of others published in CURRENT CONTENTS as well. It was another forward step, I believe, to follow up on the notion of something like a spectrum of roles in the writing of certain kinds of published speeches, articles, and books.

As you will see from the continued abundance of marginal notes on this draft, I think that further clarification is needed. I don't undertake to summarize the kinds of revision that seem indicated for that would take much time and would serve little added purpose beyond the (excessive?) specifics scribbled in the margins of the ms. (which is herewith enclosed). Once you have deciphered these comments and have reflected on them, we can talk things over at your convenience. With this in mind, I send the annotated ms. directly to you rather than adopt my usual procedure of telephoning my editorial-cum-referee observations to someone on the editorial services staff.


One concern I have, and this comes to a head on the concluding pages 18-19, is that your observations about the appropriateness of ghostwriting (not alone editing and refereeing) in the domain of science and scholarship can be construed by your readers as self-serving and even self-indulgent. The reverberations could be considerable. Not least with regard to the passage about plans for the ISI Atlas/Encyclopedia of Science. As you describe it, expert scientists will be asked to review staff-written accounts (in 1000-word segments), to suggest needed modifications, and then

(even if no changes are suggested) to sign these pieces in the capacity of authors. This promises to introduce severe strains and tensions into the basic authorial framework of the Atlas/Encyclopedia. Will readers be informed of this procedure? Will self-respecting scientist-experts agree to sign articles as authors which were written by ISI staff and then amended? This, as you know, departs widely from the practices of previous encyclopedias with regard to signed articles (as distinct from anonymous entries prepared by staff members and then reviewed by external experts). At least, that was my years-long experience as an advisory editor for WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA and my intermittent experience with the ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA.

I am particularly troubled by your saying, in this essay, that the experts' signing of these 1000-word pieces would merely be "endorsements" of the cognitive content and so, their signature as authors "should present no ethical dilemma." Is this so? "Endorsements" are surely one thing and "alleged authorship" surely another. I believe that the difficulty arises from the prior concept that one becomes an "author" merely by "accepting responsibility" for the content of some publication. As I strongly (but obviously not effectively) argued in my comments on the first draft of your essay, it is a most mischievous claim that one becomes an author merely by being willing to "accept responsibility" for a published article or book. Just as I consider it a total irrelevance to the factual and ethical matters under review that "The Copyright Act of 1976 states that the employer of a ghostwriter is considered THE OWNER of the writing produced." Legal property rights are scarcely the same as the claim that one has written an article or book; this is not a matter of law but an ethical matter involving the mores of science and scholarship (as you have masterfully indicated in the preceding pages). As I wrote in the margins of this draft: I (happen to) own a Giacometti drawing but I'd be rather reluctant to claim that I am its 'author' and should I proceed to do so, the community response would be instantaneous and urgent. So, too, if I am willing to "take intellectual responsibility" for something you or Josh wrote (because I have the utmost confidence in you), does that qualify me to claim authorship?

But now I'm beginning to lapse into redundancy. You will find these and other notes and queries in the margins. I am persuaded that such claims derive from faulty or murky concepts and that you put yourself, needlessly, in a vulnerable position by seeming to accept the implication of claimed authorship that derives from those conceptual assumptions. Perhaps you can persuade me otherwise when we talk about it in detail.

Yours, as always,


Robert K. Merton

Dr. Eugene Garfield
Institute for Scientific Information
3501 Market Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Columbia University in the City of New York | New York, N. Y. 10027

UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

Fayerweather Hall

Monday, quite a.m.-ish
23 September 1985

POSTSCRIPT TO LETTER OF 22 SEPTEMBER

Dear Gene,

Harriet and I did have our usual gratifying evening with Josh and Marguerite just as we had hoped. After a family dinner you too would have savored, we dedicated ourselves for a time to sundry ISI agenda items. I write -- briefly, I trust -- only of Josh's and my discussion of the matter raised in my editing of draft two of the Ghostwriting. . . piece: the plan announced in it of having scientists affix their names as presumed authors to pieces actually written by ISI staff for the Atlas/Encyclopedia. I don't review yet again the gist of your conversation with me about the matter yesterday afternoon, but note only that you reported this as Josh's idea, designed to gain the cooperation of first-rate scientists who would usually be too busy with their own work to write these 1,000-word capsule pieces from scratch. You will recall that I expressed a firm and strong belief that Josh was entirely right in saying that few scientists of the first rank would undertake to do such pieces entirely on their own, that drafts by ISI staff were decidedly in order as was the review of these pieces by appropriate scientist-authorities. But I refused to believe that Josh had gone on to propose that the scientist-reviewers or referees who would consent to vet the staff-written articles would agree to sign them as though they were the authors. Moreover, that if a few scientists were misguided or distracted enough to agree to this procedure, that ISI could not conscionably initiate such essentially deceitful practices.

When I summarized all this to Harriet as we were driving down to J-&-M's, she soon ventured a hypothesis: "I think I know what Josh must have said. Not that the scientists should sign these staff-composed articles but that they should sign off on them!" (That is, in the idiom well-known in Washington government circles and now in the private sector as well, "sign off" means, of course, that a qualified authority reviews a particular document or report and authorizes its dissemination upon being satisfied that it meets standards.) In short, the authority authorizes but does not pretend to be the author of the document that has been reviewed, vetted, and often revised before it is approved for circulation. Having proposed her hypothesis, Harriet agreed that we should not mention it until after Josh had told us of his position on the proposed Atlas/Encyclopedia procedure.

You can anticipate what I have to report: without the least hesitation, Josh described his dismay at the thought of having been thus misunderstood; that he too was appalled by the very idea of asking scientists to sign as authors the pieces they had only refereed and vetted, and what he had emphasized was the need for authoritative review of staff-written articles which could then be "signed off." Hypothesis confirmed -- to the hilt.

(over)

In a word, Josh had proposed the very procedure which you and I came to discuss yesterday after I expressed strong objection to the procedure outlined in the final pages of draft 2 of the essay on ghost-writing. Have the highly qualified scientists 'sign off' after they are satisfied with the (revised) staff-written drafts and have this procedure fully explained to the readers of the Atlas/Encyclopedia.

The exact terminology can be discussed: e.g.

reviewed by. . .

refereed by. . .

?

But decidedly not simply the name of the reviewing scientist which would, of course, be taken at once to indicate authorship.

A final, no doubt redundant remark but repetition here is almost cost-free:

"Author" refers to a person who originates,
the original composer of. . .

It does not refer to someone who is willing
"to assume responsibility" for what
has been written by another (as I might
gladly assume responsibility for the
entire Shakespearian corpus;

Nor does legally enforceable ownership (as
defined by the 1976 Copyright Act)
of a writing produced by a ghost-writer
constitute 'authorship.' Owners are not
authors. Or again, I might make a rich
literary or scientific career by scouting
around for unpublished mss., paying hand-
some prices for them; and then, as owner,
declaring myself publicly to be their author.

Vetting, reviewing, or refereeing do not con-
stitute authorship (except, of course, in
the limiting case where the vetter, reviewer,
or referee considered it necessary to scrap
all or almost all of a prior ms. and proceeded
to write a new one).

Apropos of a title for your Volume 8: "On Ghostwriting and Other Essays" strikes me as excellent. The essay on the subject is on its way to becoming one of the most interesting you have written, particularly as you go on to examine the 'spectrum' from invisible ghostwriting, through public institutionalized ghostwriting, through refereeing, to editing of varying degrees of intensity, to collaboration. Given the concept of a spectrum of interactive writing, can we think of your essay as spectral?

Yours,


Robert K. Merton

Dr. Eugene Garfield
ISI

Did I ever send you the enclosed item on Geo. Sarton's notion of 'ghost-writing in reverse' as this appears in OTSOG?